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## THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CLASSES\*

THEOTONIO DOS SANTOS

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CLASS was not a creation of Marxism. In ancient Greece, for example, Aristotle divides society into slaves and free men (in fact, even in Egypt there are documents posing the existence of classes in society). In his *Politics* he divides citizens into the poor, the middle class, and the rich. In the same work, he sets up relationships between forms of government and the predominance of certain social classes. In the Church Fathers too, according to Ossowski,<sup>1</sup> there was a fairly clear awareness of a slave society alongside the idea of social equality. The New Testament is full of references to social classes, always from the point of view of the relation between rich and poor, or slaves and slaveholders.

Thomas Aquinas divided society into rigid social orders, reflecting the crystallization of the feudal hierarchy in the later Middle Ages. The same could undoubtedly be established by studying the cultural tradition of the Orient and the Arab world.

On the eve of the French Revolution, people clearly saw the existence of social classes; the three estates were a basic element of social consciousness. In Babeuf we find a very clear idea of the class struggle as the determining factor in the political struggle. His interpretation of the French Revolution and the constitutions it put forth, and his vision of the society of the future, were deeply marked by the notion of the class struggle.

In Adam Smith, bourgeois economics elaborated a clear vision of the basic classes of bourgeois society, based on their economic function. The agricultural, industrial, and wage-earning classes had

\* Translated by Henry F. Mins.

<sup>1</sup> Stanislaw Ossowski, *Estructura de clases na conciencia social* (Class Structure in Social Consciousness), LER, Rio, 1964.

their origin in the basic sources of income: land, capital, and labor.

Saint-Simon regarded society as divided into two classes: the industrial class and the idle class. Proudhon was quite clear on the idea of property as the origin of the division of society into classes, an idea that had been present in Rousseau in a vaguer form.

Thus, in the nineteenth century the notion of class was identified with the very functioning of society. What Marx did was to give the notion of class a scientific dimension and, moreover, make it the basis for explaining society and its history.

Nevertheless, despite the basic importance of the conception of social classes in Marx's work, he did not give it the systematic and rigorous treatment that he gave other concepts. His major work, *Capital*, breaks off just at the chapter in which he started to deal with social classes. In addition, Marx used the notion in several earlier works, sometimes rather loosely, giving rise to a series of ambiguities as to his real meaning. Finally, Marx, like any thinker, must have developed the concept in the course of his research.

All these facts gave rise to a number of confusions concerning the notion of class. We select two criticisms which are based on the contradictory nature of the notion of class in Marx. We feel that it is essential to clear up these apparent contradictions if we are to arrive at a scientific conception of social classes.

### *I. Criticisms of Marx's Scientific Rigor*

#### *A. Georges Gurvitch*

The first thoroughgoing criticism of the contradictions in Marx's concept of classes is found in Georges Gurvitch.<sup>2</sup> His starting point is a distinction between the philosophy of history and sociology. He holds that social science can be formulated only insofar as this distinction is maintained, and that Marx never succeeded in determining it clearly. Marx's vision of society contains a tension between the social scientist and the social philosopher that leads him to an eschatology. In particular, his conception of the historical role of the proletariat is marked by an eschatological vision of an end to history: communism. In this way the proletariat is converted into a

2 Georges Gurvitch, *El Concepto de Clases Sociales desde Marx a Nuestros Días* (The Concept of Social Classes from Marx to Our Time), Ediciones Galatea.

metaphysical entity bearing an "historic mission" assigned to it by philosophy.

A second criticism relates to the diversity of the concepts of class that are found in Marx's work. In the first place, according to Gurvitch, Marx never establishes clearly whether or not class consciousness is a necessary factor in the definition of a social class. Sometimes the presence of class consciousness appears as a decisive factor for the existence of the social class; in other cases the social class appears without this consciousness being manifested. In the second place, Gurvitch holds, Marx did not succeed in clearly defining how social classes are to be distinguished from other groupings, such as castes, orders, estates, etc. As a result, Marx cannot give a clear answer to the question of whether classes have always existed. He speaks of classes as characterizing all recorded history; on the other hand, he lays down certain characteristics of social classes that mark them as groupings confined to modern industrial society.

A third criticism relates to the number of classes that Marx distinguishes in his works. Gurvitch holds that Marx distinguished various classes in modern society but failed to define the relations among the various classes and between them and other modern social groupings. Marx never clearly defined the role of such groups as the petty bourgeoisie, the bureaucracy, etc.

Gurvitch's fourth criticism is directed at the conception of ideology. He asks whether Marx's position is that ideologies are illusions of consciousness or conscious deceptions. Is an ideology a taking up of a position, of a class consciousness, or is it a doctrine intended to justify the real behavior of classes? What is the difference between ideology and what Gurvitch calls the "objective works" of consciousness (religion, morality, law, etc.)? Are these "objective works" ideological too? Finally, it would seem that for Marx the social sciences (except economics), philosophical knowledge, religion, etc., are likewise ideologies.

Gurvitch's conclusion is that Marx does not have any very rigorous conception of social classes and that his work shows a tension between sociology and social philosophy that prevents him from arriving at a correct conception. This, however, says Gurvitch, is not to deny the importance of Marx's statement of the concept of class, but to point out the importance of clarifying the concept and clearing it of Marx's contradictions.

We shall not, for the time being, deal with the solutions that Gurvitch offers for these problems. The aim of our theoretical study of the concept of social classes in Marx will be to show that these statements of Gurvitch, which appear in various forms in other writers, are incorrect. We aim to show that the ambiguities are only consequences of Gurvitch's failure to understand Marx's universe of discourse, and in so doing we shall criticize his criticisms and the false "solutions" he offers for the false problems he raises. Before going into this, we have to discuss Stanislaw Ossowski, who also criticizes the rigor of Marx's conception of class.

### *B. Stanislaw Ossowski*

Stanislaw Ossowski, the Polish sociologist, is the author of an interesting study on class structure in social consciousness.<sup>3</sup> In it he takes up three ways in which Marx treats of social classes.

1) *Dichotomous pattern*. Here class relations are presented as a sharp opposition between dominant and dominated classes. This, he states, was the pattern preferred by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*, as he emphasized the relations between exploited and exploiters, workers and non-workers, throughout history. This perspective would be in line with Marx's political interest in stressing the most violent aspects of the class struggle.

In *Capital*, according to Ossowski, Marx emphasized the dichotomy between wage-earners and capitalists. Sometimes, especially in the closing chapters of *Capital*, Marx used the principle of functional division of income to divide the classes into wage-earners, capitalists, and landowners. In doing so, Marx would have followed the threefold division of Adam Smith, based on the function in production. Elsewhere, Marx is said to have used the threefold pattern for purposes of sociopolitical analysis, distinguishing capitalists, wage-earners, and petty bourgeois (the latter being taken to mean those who do not work for wages, or as workers using means of production they own).

2) According to Ossowski, Marx as a sociologist used a *pattern of gradation* on other occasions, differentiating classes by their higher or lower position on a scale. For example, he sometimes distinguished a petty bourgeoisie as a middle sector, according to the size of their

<sup>3</sup> Stanislaw Ossowski, *op. cit.*

property. On other occasions he differentiated other middle sectors or intermediate classes, or arranged classes hierarchically on the basis of their ownership of means of production.

3) Finally, the Polish sociologist says, Marx, operating as an economist or sociologist, differentiated classes according to a *functional pattern*, according to ownership of sources of income. Thus, for example, he brought out the clash between sectors of classes or between dominant classes of different social systems. Examples would be the struggle between financial aristocracy and industrial bourgeoisie plus petty bourgeoisie (*Class Struggles in France* and *German Ideology*), the struggle of the bourgeoisie against the nobility (*Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*). Engels too resorted to this functional pattern in his study of the rural population in the *Peasant War in Germany*. Likewise, he says, the concept of "lumpenproletariat" as a social stratum is based on its socioeconomic function, or rather the absence of any such function.

To sum up, according to the Polish sociologist Marx set up different images of society depending on the purposes of his analysis. As a political analyst, he stressed the aspects of exploitation; as a sociological or economic analyst, he laid down more complex divisions in order to find correlations within a differentiated class structure, the superstructure, and other phenomena. Ossowski distinguishes two basic possible foci for the struggle of classes in history: struggles between oppressor and oppressed (the *Manifesto*) and/or the struggle between classes having differing interests (Engels, in the introduction to the *Class Struggles in France*).

Ossowski does not deny the legitimacy of adopting these distinct patterns, but regards them as superposed and irreducible to analytic unity. The cause he assigns for Marx's contradictions is not a lack of scientific rigor in his work but a difference in emphasis depending on the aims of the analysis in each case. A question must be raised, however: are these superposed patterns of analysis or different levels of a single analytical process of synthesis? We shall try to answer this question in giving a systematic treatment of the concept of classes in Marx.

In point of fact, does Marx's work contain the diversity of focus and conceptualization that Gurvitch and Ossowski speak of? At first sight it would seem that it does. But this diversity does not have the chaotic or superposed form that these authors present. By differen-

tiating them and isolating them from their general analytic context, Gurvitch and Ossowski destroy the most profound feature of Marxist method: dialectics. To analyze Marx from the point of view of analytical thinking, as they do, along with most critics of Marx, is to destroy his thought. It is not hard to criticize a Marx who has been thus destroyed and deformed. But his thinking takes on full force when it is presented alive and supported by its framework of dialectical materialism.

## II. *How to Understand the Concept in Marx*

In order to restore the unity of the concept of classes in Marx we have to follow his works in inverted order. We have to begin with *Capital* to give the context in which the concept appears in Marx's thought, and then go from this starting point to the earlier works, in which the concept appears on a concrete level.

Marx took up the concept of classes in the last chapter he wrote for his book. The place of the concept in *Capital* shows us the level of abstraction on which Marx treated it. He proceeded to deal with the concept of classes only after having analyzed the process of the production of capital in the first volume, the process of the circulation of capital in the second, and the process of capitalist production as a whole at the end of his study. In particular, he was going to deal with it in the section on rent and its sources. This position tells us that the concept of classes arose theoretically for Marx on the level of concrete analysis of a specific mode of production. It is the link that makes it a socially determinate form. The text reads:

The owners merely of labor-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit, and ground-rent, in other words, wage-laborers, capitalists, and land-owners, constitute then three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of classes appears here as the personification of the central economic categories of a given system of production. But no system of production in history has existed in a pure state; it only exists combined with other systems of production and other socio-economic factors of the same system which were not described in the theoretical analysis. Marx therefore adds:

4 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III (New York, 1967), p. 885.

In England, modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in economic structure. Nevertheless, *even here the stratification of classes does not appear in its pure form. Middle and intermediate strata even here obliterate lines of demarcation everywhere.* . . . [emphasis mine—TDS]<sup>5</sup>

By this statement Marx posed the problem that class structure, as it appears empirically in society, is much more complex than the essential relations between the classes of society. However, theoretical study of these classes is a fundamental element in understanding the developmental trends of that concrete society. He states, therefore, that from the point of view of theoretical investigation of the basic classes of society, the problem of the empirical class structure is a matter of indifference, since what is involved is determining the tendencies that develop with the capitalist system of production.

However, this is immaterial for our analysis. We have seen that the continual tendency and law of development of the capitalist mode of production is more and more to divorce the means of production from labor, and more and more to concentrate the scattered means of production into large groups, thereby transforming labor into wage-labor and the means of production into capital. And to this tendency, on the other hand, corresponds the independent separation of landed property from capital and labor, or the transformation of all landed property into the form of landed property corresponding to the capitalist mode of production.<sup>6</sup>

In the last analysis, determination of the basic social classes of society is not a task of empirical observation but one for theoretical investigation of the mode of production that makes the society. As Marx states it:

The first question to be answered is this: What constitutes a class?—and the reply to this follows naturally from the reply to another question, namely: What makes wage-laborers, capitalists, and landlords constitute the three great social classes?<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the question of whether these classes or those exist turns into an analysis of the mode of production. As he had

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 885

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 885.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 886.



done in his chapter on the appearance of competition, Marx carries his analysis forward by criticizing the appearance that classes derive their origin from distinct forms of revenue. At this point the manuscript breaks off, leaving up in the air the course the analysis was to take.

Although Marx did not complete his manuscript on social classes, we can draw some methodological conclusions as to his way of attacking the problem.

In the first place, he meant to treat the concept of class on several interdependent levels of analysis. This raises the question of the levels of abstraction on which the problem is to be studied. Rigorous differentiation and interdependence of the levels of abstraction is one of the major aspects of the dialectical method, distinguishing it radically from the formal analytical method. In differentiating the levels of abstraction, Marx has as his objective the development of a theoretical study of certain definite conditions which do not exist in a pure form in empirical reality but the definition of which is a prerequisite to an explanation of that reality. From that point on the method seeks to encompass the other aspects of the reality progressively and to approach the concrete. This aspect of analysis is called the process of progressive concretion.

In the second place, the starting point of Marx's analysis is the study of a determinate mode of production. At any given moment social classes appear as "personifications," the volitional, personal, active content of certain relations that are described abstractly. This does not mean that at a more concrete level it will be impossible to describe the classes of society as social groups that can be studied sociologically. However, this empirical study of classes has a definite theoretical sense only when it is located within the framework of an abstract analysis. That is, it is only possible to arrive at an explanatory level of analysis when the empirical descriptive level is inserted into an abstract theoretical picture. This gives a more precise form to the problem of levels of abstraction, by clearly defining the theoretical starting point of the analysis.<sup>8</sup>

8 The theoretical starting point does not mean the starting point for the study of a society. It is possible to start to study a society at a completely empirical or impressionistic level, but the study will only take on the status of science when it succeeds in defining the essential relationships of that society. From that point on the study has the form of a theory and hence is scientific.

This leads to the next task, that of studying the concept of class on its various levels of abstraction.

### *III. Levels of the Concept of Classes*

#### *A. First level: The Mode of Production*

The first level on which the concept of classes has to be located is the analysis of the mode of production. The concept of classes appears as the result of analysis of the productive forces (technological level of the means of production and organization of labor power) and of the relations of production (relations that men set up among themselves in the process of social production). These productive forces and relations of production take on certain possible *modes* in connection with history. These possible modes of relation are essentially contradictory when the relations of production are built up on the basis of private property. This contradictory character defines the general laws of functioning and development of class modes of production.

Hence, analysis of the mode of production presupposes a certain dynamics characteristic of this mode of production, whose components are antagonistic. Social classes are a fundamental expression of these antagonistic relations. Consequently, the concept of social classes is formed, theoretically, within the concept of class struggle. The struggle of classes is therefore the key conception for understanding social classes. For this reason, the concept of classes requires an essentially dialectical analysis.

The struggle of classes is related directly to progressing beyond a given social formation (mode of production plus political and cultural mode). Hence, the concept can only be understood in the context of the contradictions and laws of internal development of a given mode of production and a given social formation. The concept of class consciousness in Marxism does not correspond to the vulgar empirical idea of the consciousness that individuals have of their class status. One of the basic achievements of Marxist social science is defined in the phrase of the preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

. . . so we cannot judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must rather be explained

from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production.<sup>9</sup>

What is involved is showing the possible antagonistic forms of consciousness corresponding to given modes of production, not what men think at a given moment. We have to give a theoretical description of the possible forms of consciousness, to which the empirical or psychological consciousness of men may approach more or less closely.

There is a whole set of Marxist texts supporting this interpretation, from the preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, just cited, to the typology in Engels' *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, and in sections in *Capital*, on capital accumulation and elsewhere. The idea is to study classes and class consciousness at a highly abstract level and at the same time with reference to a concrete historical formation. Class consciousness cannot be studied apart from the concrete historical forms of production. These concrete forms are studied in their essential purity, that is, under quasi-laboratory conditions—conditions created by abstraction, which isolates from phenomena all the secondary, specific aspects of particular forms, so as to emphasize what is central and specific in the mode of production under investigation.

The key to the concept of classes and class consciousness on this theoretical level is given in the preface to the first edition of *Capital*:

I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests.<sup>10</sup>

The mastery with which Marx relates economic relations to cultural relations in *Capital* derives from his conception of economics. For him, economics does not study relations among things, nor between men and things; it studies relations among men, which *appear* in men's consciousness as relations among things. As an example: the exchange of merchandise is apparently an exchange among things, but it is only the object of Marxist political economy insofar as it is

9 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago, 1904), p. 12.

10 Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, p. 10.

an exchange of products of human labor, that is, a form of relation among men. Hence, the economic categories of Marxism, in contrast to the empirical categories of vulgar social science, go beyond the fetishized appearances of social phenomena to reach their essence: relations among men, studied in the form of specific relations, determinate modes of relation among them. Among these modes of relation, social classes enter as the personification into large human groupings of these relations, which individuals in general are unaware of, or perceive in forms that are accidental, unconnected, chaotic, indeterminate, unscientific.

Would not this idea of Marxism reduce it to a sort of empirical idealism, in which observation of reality is replaced by theoretical categories that *create* the reality? On the other hand, would not an idea of this type change Marxism into a formal theory to use as a tool of empirical observation, that is a sort of ideal type?

Neither one nor the other. In the first place, these categories of Marxist analysis do not arise out of the possible conditions for perceiving social reality (transcendental idealism) but out of the theoretical expression of social practice. The process that enables us to arrive at the basic explanatory categories of social reality is the process of abstraction from the concrete relations in which men live in the reality of history.

In the second place, what are involved are not operational categories established by more or less arbitrary or free premises (ideal types) but "essential" categories, categories that are constituted by reality itself and derived from it.

Third, they are not in any sense formal categories, since they do not represent possible relations abstractly set up, but real relations which give the possible conditions of abstraction. That is, they are abstractions from real modes of production and not universal categories applicable to historically undetermined realities. It is historical reality itself that *constitutes* the possibilities of the theoretical categories.

However, social reality is not exhausted by the modes of its movement. Much rather, reality has a concrete movement that comes into contradiction with the possible modes of the movement, since concrete reality includes other elements that are much more complex than the abstractions from the conditions of its movement.

*B. Second level: Social Structure*

A concrete, historically given society cannot correspond directly to abstract categories. As we have said, Marxism does not use abstraction formally. After it has elaborated the concept abstractly, it later denies it, showing the limitations of this level of the concept. Hence, the need for passing to more concrete levels of abstraction. In a concrete society:

1) The development of the means of production and its contradictions gives rise to historically specific social situations (for example, at the end of the nineteenth century the capitalist mode of production takes on an imperialist form and today this form assumes a character integrated on a worldwide scale, etc.);

2) The development of the mode of production evolves new specific forms of relation among its components and creates new components (example: the development of unions limits wage relations; the rise of new social sectors, such as the so-called labor aristocracy or the "new middle classes" changes the distribution of surplus value in the system and affects the forms in which the surplus value is realized, etc.);

3) On a still more concrete level, social forms coexist in a society that are in antagonism with the ruling formation and limit it, while setting up historically delimited equilibrium situations (e.g.: the struggle between ruling and ruled classes of antagonistic modes of production—capitalism versus feudalism; the rise of intermediate classes on the road to disappearance, or classes in the process of formation; the case of the country-city contradiction; etc.).

On this level, the analysis must be made more concrete by means of description (which still remains theoretical) of the modes of relation possible in a given society, that is, in a given social structure.<sup>11</sup> The difference from the preceding level is that now the analysis has to relate to an historically and geographically situated universe of discourse, which presents the level of development of a determinate social formation and its relations with other social formations. Empirical data of historical, demographic, sociological nature must be worked up to paint the picture of the basic relations and their dyna-

11 Without going into a discussion of the concept of formal or descriptive structure, we prefer to use the concept of structure as meaning the expression of existing (conditioning and not "possible") of a given society.

mics. On this level, class consciousness must be treated in the form of theoretically defined social interests. That is, class consciousness will be taken as meaning *the possible forms of consciousness under the specific conditions of a given social structure*. The analysis will be much more concrete and have more nuances, but is still not related to what persons or social groups think, empirically.

### *C. Third level: Social Situation*

On this level the analysis approaches the description of a concrete society. However, this description will not be purely empirical, but scientific, because it takes into account the determinations that explain this immediate or "apparent" reality. Having at our disposal a theoretical instrument of the types described, we shall not confuse class structure with social stratification, as many sociologists have done, nor the power elites with the ruling class, nor the psychology of classes with their class consciousness, etc.

We see from this that as we differentiate the structure internally, we encounter a series of phenomena correlated with and dependent on the class structure. One of these phenomena is social stratification, which introduces a factor of hierarchization of the individuals of the society, not only according to their class position but also according to differences of income, profession, culture, politics, etc. At this point the focus can be shifted from the social categories to an effort to classify the individuals within these categories, which are sometimes peculiar in form and not theoretically predictable. The individuals are no longer personifications of social categories but become persons, and can themselves constitute categories by virtue of the set of social aspects that intersect in their persons. However, there is no need to carry this step in analysis to such an extreme of empirical concretion. It will still be possible to analyze the relations of class structure to these systems of stratification in general.

Another element that is added at this level is the projection of stratification systems of various social formations on a new system of stratification (for example, the projection of rural seigniorial stratification on rational urban stratification in Latin American countries), thereby forming a much more complex concrete reality. This is a very common problem in the psychology of transitional or recently constituted classes.

On this level we are working with socially given values, in which the class structure comes up against very different determinations, produced by the specific nature of a given social situation. On this level we can not study class consciousness (that is, the conditions and possible modes of expression of class interests); this can only be done on the level of what Lukacs has called class psychology. By class psychology is meant the forms of thought and feeling of historically situated social classes. On this level important problems arise concerning contradictions between the *class* interests of a class and its immediate interests; contradictions between its class interests and its historical origins; between its mentality as conditioned by the existing structure, the values of social stratification, race relations, etc., and the class interests that are the condition of its possibilities for class action.

Here the full power of the analytical richness of the dialectical method is in apparent. In contrast with the unilinear flat reality of empiricism there is a multiplicity of planes, contradictions, possibilities of analysis of human behavior. And there also emerges the dramatic condition of social reality, the contradictions among individuals and their objective and psychological reality. The tragic, grotesque, or comical aspects of human existence emerge. Thus, science comes into contact with real politics, literature, art, and people's daily existence. It becomes life. This is the secret power of Marxism, although as yet not completely developed: its ability to connect the most absolute abstract theoretical rigor with the most everyday realities of man.

#### *D. Fourth level: Cycles*

Finally, the analysis becomes even richer and more differentiated when we introduce the effect of certain specific crises in the study of the phenomenon. The class structure undergoes profound changes according to the phase of the cycle in which its contradictions evolve.

In ascending phases of the capitalist cycle, for example, the behavior and psychology of classes have a completely different aspect than in crisis or revolutionary situations. In crisis situations class psychology and consciousness tend to merge into a single reality. Men realize the conditions of their existence more clearly. The situation is different in phases of ascent or equilibrium, in which class psy-



chology and consciousness tend to break apart and the immediate shapes of phenomena tend to obscure their real modes of existence.

Empiricist science, by overvaluing the datum as compared with the determination, replaces the totality by the aspects or forms in which it appears. It tends, thereby, to confuse the dynamics of reality with the apparent dynamics of certain historical periods. In the decade of the 1890s, when capitalism was ascendent and free from crises, Bernstein's theory arose, denying that capitalist crises were necessary; World War I and the 1929 Depression refuted that theory violently. In our day, these tendencies to deny capitalist crisis are being given new life by the more or less prolonged capitalist development in recent years. The forms of mass consumption tend to obscure the class relations in society; empiricists substitute mass society for class society.

### *Some Conclusions*

We can now arrive at some overall formulations. The different social classes that Marx discovered and the apparently distinct perspectives in which the class phenomenon is viewed do not signify a superposition of different foci or perspectives, but a structured system of planes of abstraction ranging from the most concrete to the most abstract and from the most abstract to the most concrete. The closer we come to the concrete, the more the general laws have to be redefined in ever more complex relations.

Representing the concrete without these determinations is still not scientific work, but systematic observation. Science begins when the description becomes determination, becomes "determinate concrete" or, contrarywise, "universal concrete." Certain determinate cyclical phases tend to accentuate the contradiction between the appearance of phenomena and their modes of being, i.e. their "essence;" other phases, particularly those that are revolutionary, make the essential aspects of reality "appear" in immediate experience.

Empiricist social science turns the immediate into an absolute, since it cannot show its relations with the modes of being or the conditions that determine it; therefore, it is not science. It is a codification of methods of observation (positive aspect) and an ideologization of existing relations (negative aspect).



*IV. Class Consciousness (I)*

We know the distinction that Marx made between class in itself and class for itself. However, this Hegelian-sounding distinction can be the source of a good deal of confusion. The analytic separation between classes as objective relations on the level of the relations of production and consciousness of those relations has to be worked out with maximum rigor.

A class is defined primarily by the relations or modes of relations conditioning the possibilities of interaction among men, given a determinate mode of production. In this sense, the concept of class consciousness is a pure concept; that is, it is abstract, theoretical, not directly referable to one or more empirical consciousnesses. On this level, as we have seen, we can define the consciousness of a class as the possible conscious representation of its interests within a given mode of production. The individuals that make up or "personify" these abstract categories, i.e., that realize these relations in practice, do not in general have the theoretical resources for representing them in their consciousnesses. They represent them in a chaotic, unsystematic, fragmentary way, confused with the ideas dominant in their society or in which they were brought up. Systematization, in the heads of individuals, of these impressions of a system of real relations forms the *class psychology*. Insofar as this class psychology fails to express the reality of these relations in a significant sector of the individuals that make up a class, these human aggregates may be thought of as a *class in itself*.

But it will be a *class for itself* in a social situation in which it becomes aware of these relations in the form of a political ideology that clearly defines the real conditions of its existence and the contradiction between those conditions and its interests as a social class, and which proposes the means of overcoming this situation. It then goes on to constitute a class "*for itself*," that is, a class able to work out a project of social existence suited to its class interests.

This way of posing the problem eliminates some confusions that are fairly widespread, with respect to the concept of class consciousness and ideology. The first confusion is the identification of consciousness with class psychology. Class consciousness is often taken to mean the ideas held by certain historically given social groupings. Superposing psychology and consciousness makes it impossible to under-

stand the contradictory dynamics of these two elements and confuses the immediately given with reality itself.

A second confusion is the identification of ideology with a falsification of the real, a mere justification or "rationalization" of certain interests. The concept of ideology, taken in its pure initial form, does not necessarily presuppose any falsification of reality or any rationalization. In a first stage of analysis, an ideology is the conscious expression of real class interests, making them operational in forms of concrete action to realize those interests.

In a subsequent stage, and only in a subsequent stage, and whether or not this be necessarily so, comes the element of falsity. For not all ideologies are false, and no ideology is false insofar as it is a representation of the interests it expresses. On the contrary, in this sense ideologies are only present when there is a *truthful* representation of interests.

How is it possible for the *truthful* representation of a class's interests to be *false* at the same time? The reason is that the interests of all ruling classes include the necessity of falsifying the actual class relations.

Bourgeois ideology must comprise representation of bourgeois society as a basic group of individuals, who *may* differentiate into groupings but who always constitute the unit for analysis, since this form of representation is an exact expression of the essential interest of the bourgeoisie in concealing the class nature of their society and postulating their society as offering equal opportunities to all individuals. It is to the class interest of the bourgeoisie to conceive of itself not as a ruling class but, at most, as dominant individuals.

And bourgeois ideology has to be based on this falsehood. Yet, with reference to representation of its fundamental class interests, it is truthful. This is the source of the intricate character of mystification implied by these types of class consciousness. This is why it is impossible to set up a true bourgeois science (explication of reality, knowledge of reality and not of its immediate appearance), and why bourgeois science will always be a prisoner of its ideology, and therefore ideological.

To the extent that science begins to explain reality (and all ruling classes stand in need of knowledge, despite their need of *not really* knowing), it comes into contradiction with the ideology of the ruling class. This leads to the ideological need to falsify reality,

which is expressed in the need of bourgeois theory to be pragmatic and empirical, to erect the immediate (that is, bourgeois) relations among men, and between men and nature, into absolutes.

To confound ideology in this form with falsity is to make it impossible to demonstrate the determinate class character of that falsity. Likewise with the ideology of the proletariat. It is "true" by nature, in the sense that it can and must represent its class interests as class interests. This possibility converts into a theoretical need to outline the character of bourgeois society and the historically transitory nature of the proletarian society. The ideology will only be proletarian if it is based on a scientific (non-ideological) view of reality. This eliminates the contradiction between science and ideology. Both become aspects of a single unity of interest.

Posing the problem in this way may seem excessively "metaphysical" to empiricists, since empiricism calls all theoretical investigation metaphysical. But in point of fact, metaphysics is the contrary position, which isolates the conditions of scientific thought from the social-historical reality and by reason of that isolation proves itself unable to solve the problems it raises. That is, it becomes unable to explain the causes that make it possible for science to evolve in contradictory forms of thought that are fully identifiable with the evolution of the class struggle. Above all, that metaphysical school can not explain how man has arrived at knowledge under ideological conditions of thinking.

Another aspect of the relation between ideology and truth becomes evident in the relation between rising and decadent classes. In its phase of political and economic rise, the bourgeoisie was driven by a deep-seated need for theoretical knowledge and rationalism. Classical political economy, for example, obviously is a thousand times higher in theoretical and speculative status than the pragmatism of contemporary economic science, which is well expressed in Keynes' celebrated phrase, "In the long run we shall all be dead." Latin American economics of the '40s and '50s made excursions (very limited ones, to be sure) into the theoretical and speculative field, expressing the need for erecting a science that could overcome the limitations felt by the infant industrial capitalism of Latin America as it faced the conditions of underdevelopment. Their flights were as short as were the wings of that bourgeoisie and its possibilities for development.

When the bourgeoisie is in power, its situation is different. The problems of a qualitative order, which call for going beyond the immediate data to theoretical investigation, are replaced by the needs of developing the existing social order. Bourgeois thought then becomes more and more anti-speculative, anti-rational, anti-theory. Pragmatism, or intellectual barbarism, replaces abstract reasoning; empirical observation or formal games replace scientific *knowledge* or abstract reasoning. The fields of knowledge are isolated into intellectual islands, not because of extension of knowledge of the particular, as is sometimes asserted, but because of the pragmatic theoretical attitude corresponding to a social and economic reality based on atomization of man, whom class and social relations render incapable of integrating with his society.

This sets up a close relationship between scientific truth and the conditions of the class struggle. The social reality of exploitation and a society based on class antagonism is a real limitation on scientific truth and transforms science into an ideology. In bourgeois society, it is not ideology that is based on science but science that is based on ideology. As a result, unless the thinker can denounce his own tricks and shifts and thereby cease to be a bourgeois, bourgeois thought cannot elucidate the relation between science and ideology.

#### *V. Class Consciousness (II)*

We are now ready to redefine the concepts of class consciousness, ideology, and class psychology.

By class consciousness is meant the systematic expression of the interests of social classes; by ideology, the operationalization of those interests into aims, and definite means for achieving them; by class psychology, the mode of thought and feeling of determinate human groupings in a given situation or at a given instant.

Class consciousness is determined on the level of analysis of class interests within a given social formation, independently of the existence of individuals who may or may not perceive those interests. Ideology is determined by an effort of theory to express the forms of possible development of those interests and the ends and means it can generate. Class psychology is determined on the level of the empirical study of individuals or of certain collective phenomena, always referring its dynamics to the determination of class conscious-

ness and ideology and to the conflicts existing between the class's psychology and its class consciousness.

Analysis aims at defining the elements that condition class consciousness in actual human groupings, and cause it to rise or fall. These elements would consist of:

- 1) An analysis of the pure (abstract) objective relations on the level of the mode of production to which the class belongs;
- 2) The level of development of that mode of production in a given structure or historical situation, in combination with other modes of production; its relation to determinate historical (social, political, ideological, etc.) situations;
- 3) The empirically observable state of that consciousness.

These three levels should be combined in a dialectical analysis which presupposes the possibility of relating these levels to a given cyclical phase and its developmental tendencies.

A special problem may arise in studying transitory classes, or those which do not succeed in crystallizing as classes, since their conditions of existence in society are in constant transformation toward new forms of relation. By definition, the consciousness of these classes cannot crystallize into a solid set of interests and they are subject to the constant pressure of the interests of other classes (e.g., the petty bourgeoisie under the capitalist system). This does not deprive the class of its specific character as transitional, but makes analysis of its class consciousness and psychology very complex.

Attention should be given to the antagonistic character of class consciousness. If social classes are defined by their antagonistic interests as against one another, class consciousness will likewise be defined by this antagonistic character. This antagonism is not expressed simply in the form of opposing interests within the existing mode of production. For these classes really to be able to have class consciousness, distinct social systems have to confront one another. The antagonism finds expression in a relation of overcoming, destruction, or domination of one class by another. This insures the role of the class struggle in history, as the moving force not only within systems but in the supplanting of one system by another.

This understanding of the nature of class consciousness also reveals the role of the intellectual in the class struggle, which is usually masked by certain mistaken conceptions. Since class consciousness is at once a factor conditioned by human activity (i.e., a conscious

result of that activity) and a factor conditioning it (i.e., the consciousness that enables man to dominate his activity and bring it into line with his ends), the intellectual plays a key role in its development. For only systematic intellectual activity can draw the consequences of practice and systematize it in such a way that consciousness becomes effective consciousness on the part of the individuals of the class.

Those who are immersed in practice and cannot bring it to the level of consciousness (a task that requires a specific theoretical *labor*<sup>12</sup>) do not have class consciousness, therefore. It is precisely the intellectuals who develop class consciousness and ideology. That is why Lenin insisted, in his *What Is to Be Done?*, that the proletariat left to his own condition cannot arrive at a class consciousness, but at most to a trade-union consciousness (the need to unite and struggle for more advantageous sale of its merchandise, labor power, in capitalist society). In so doing he showed how hard it is for workers to understand the general relationships of the system and the consequent need for educating them in socialism, which is their class consciousness; and he ended by saying: without revolutionary theory there is no revolutionary practice. It would be impossible to realize the vital role of theory in classical Marxism without an understanding of the concepts of class consciousness, ideology, and psychology.

The intellectual, considered not as an individual isolated in an ivory tower but as a militant intellectual of a class, is thus a key factor in working out and developing class consciousness. Intellectual activity regains its permanent privileged role in Marxism, distinguishing it from the pragmatic empiricist conceptions that pass muster as Marxist.

It may still be asked: Did class consciousness exist in pre-capitalist societies? In those societies, did not individuals think of themselves not as classes, but as castes, orders, estates, and so on? How can one speak of class consciousness in such a situation?

We have raised the theoretical problem of the relation between class structure and social stratification. We have seen that the first explains the second, despite the fact that the real dynamics of society embodies the dialectical relationship between the two. Capitalism cleared class consciousness of those mystified forms of relation among

12 The concept of theoretical activity as work leads us to Althusser's conception of *theoretical praxis*.

men, by installing economics as the basic criterion for differentiating among them. But we have also seen that bourgeois consciousness is unable to conceive of class relations as the basis of human history; it needs to obscure those relations. We have likewise seen the necessity of proletarian class consciousness for revealing those relationships as the basis of its theory of social reality.

From all this we can conclude that class consciousness becomes freer and freer of the *mystified* forms of relations among men (forms accompanied by magical, mystical, religious, philosophical, etc., justifications), that is, non-class forms of interhuman relations, the closer society comes to eliminating class relations. This explains why the concept of class arose only in capitalist society and more specifically, in proletarian class consciousness. It is the historical reduction of the relations among men to class relations that explains the historical possibility of unmystified class consciousness, i.e. consciousness that is aware of itself as class consciousness.

Many people who have been brought up in an untheoretical science may feel that posing the problem of class consciousness in this way means introducing metaphysical, unscientific factors into the analysis. But the metaphysical is quite the contrary of this. That is, the impossibility of studying the problem at that theoretical level prevents us from explaining the origin of the concept of classes and class consciousness, the relations among knowledge, practice, class consciousness, and class psychology.

If this line of thinking is immersed in the mode of the appearances, without being able to explain them, we are left tied up theoretically in inexplicable phenomena and unable to attain a social science, unable to *explain* the relations that appear in contradictory and mystified forms in the unconscious practice of men. Then science, instead of being a factor for making men more conscious, turns into its own contrary, a means of absolutizing the situation of mystification based on the relation of exploitation of man by man against his will and his protests. The "pure," "unideological," and "uncommitted" scientists thus show the deep-going class commitment that makes their "science" an ideology.

Clearing science of ideology thus means clearing science of certain class commitments, not to classes in general but to the classes that cannot permit scientific knowledge—the exploiting classes.



*VI. Attempt At Conceptualization*

We can now attempt a conceptualization of social classes.

By social classes we shall mean basic groupings of individuals in a society, opposed to one another by virtue of the role they play in the productive process, from the point of view of the relations they establish among themselves in the organization of labor and in respect of property. Then, the elements of the concept of classes may be broken down, on the general and abstract level, into:

- 1) group of individuals
- 2) basic in society
- 3) opposed to one another
- 4) with respect to their function in the productive process in respect of:
  - a) labor relations
  - b) property

The relations of Item 4 are differentiated historically according to the modes taken on by these labor and property relations. These modes of production, in turn, give rise to distinct socio-economic formations (mode of production, plus classes, plus superstructures).

We may now go on to a second aspect of the concept: its involutions.

The unity of interest of these basic groupings as opposed to other groupings (of the same social formation or survivals from other formations or the bases for future formations) and to society as a whole makes them *tend* towards a community of:

1) *Class consciousness*, i.e., a unity of conception of the world and society in accordance with the general class interests; this gives rise to an ideology.

2) *Social situation*, i.e., modes of behavior, attitudes, values, immediate interests, income distribution, conception of society and the world, feelings and emotions, political action and interest as against parties and the state, etc.

This *tendency* to adapt to their final interests (which are objectively determinable and independent of whether or not they are aware of them) is put into action historically to a greater or lesser extent depending on the various historical components (social, economic, political, cultural, cyclical) that go to make up a social situation. These components are formed by the complexity of relations,



in a given society, among the various social formations at grips within it, and they combine into a provisional structure of contradictory relations.

Another component of the concrete reality, not posed in the abstraction of the mode of social production, are the differences of level among its economic, social, political, and cultural aspects. Finally, the specific cyclical phases in which this evolution appears (revolutions, rises, periods of equilibrium, etc.) cause great changes in the degree of contradiction, equilibrium, and correlation among the various classes and groups that go to make up a concrete social structure.

After this effort at conceptualization, we can sum up our answers to the objections raised by various authors who, we feel, have a basic lack of understanding of the dialectical nature (differences of levels, relation between the concrete and the abstract, role of contradictions) of the Marxist conception. These objections can only be maintained by supporting them on texts taken out of context or on the unsound interpretations of various "Marxists."

1) The point at issue is not a philosophy of history or an "eschatology" confronting a sociology. The concept of class struggle and its necessary projections in new forms of production is a prerequisite for any dynamic analysis of classes and basic for any explanation of its actual dynamics. Classes do not struggle "within" a system; rather, the struggle tends to take on the nature of a struggle "by" different systems.

2) The point at issue is not distinct concepts of class, nor of superimposed views from the point of view of the economist, politician or sociologist, but a dialectical view in which the concept is "made over" according to the level of abstraction on which the analysis is located.

3) The point at issue is not any vagueness as to the number of classes; the number of social classes varies according to the level of analysis and the historically given social structures.

4) The point at issue is not a confused conception of ideology in which various contrary or distinct conceptions actually appear. What is involved is the dialectical nature of ideology, which presupposes: a) a *true* representation of the class interests; b) the need for introducing among the interests of certain classes the requirement of masking and mystifying their status as ruling classes, making it impossible for their class consciousness to reflect their interests in any real

form. But this does not justify assuming a necessary relation between ideology and mystification in all social classes.

5) The point at issue is not that of assigning the proletariat or any social class an "historical mission" from a metaphysical or religious point of view. When we speak of a "mission," we refer to the historical potentialities of a class whose material interests, which are objectively determinable, lead to definite historical results as soon as their interests can come to the fore historically. The conception of "mission" is used in the same sense in which Marx used it in the *Poverty of Philosophy* in referring to the historical mission of the bourgeoisie: "The prerequisite for the liberation of the working class is the abolition of all classes, just as the liberation of the 'Tiers état' led to the liberation of all the estates (medieval 'estates')." "

6) This likewise explains the problem of the appearance of classes as such in capitalist society. As Engels says: "The Revolution abolished the Estates and their privileges. Today bourgeois society recognizes only classes." Because of this, because of the need for organizing capitalist society on the basis of directly economic relations between the "free worker" (wage worker) and the owners of the means of production, the concept of classes assumed its conscious and direct form in society, doing away with the mystified forms of estates, strata, castes, etc., in which it appeared in precapitalist social formations.

7) Finally, we come to Ossowski's dichotomy as to whether the relation among classes should be taken on the basis of opposing interests or of relations between exploited and exploiters. It is a false dichotomy, since the relation between exploited and exploiters creates opposing interests, and it is only by theoretically systematizing those relations and interests that we can succeed in setting up an analysis of the classes.

### *VII. How To Investigate Classes*

We can now sketch the steps that we feel should be taken in a scientific study of social classes. The fact that we have arranged this study in a series of research steps which have a certain autonomy and interdependence does not mean that the analysis cannot be begun on an intermediate level, or even on the final level. Our contention is that an effective scientific knowledge (that is, one that states conditions, is explanatory and causal) can only be attained when we

can locate a given society or group of societies or international society within this general model of analysis. This is not to say that social science exists only when this exhaustive knowledge is attained. It is posed rather as a scientific ideal than as an immediate aim.

*A. Analysis of the productive process*

The starting point for class analysis would be analysis of the productive process, in which we can distinguish:

1) The level of development of the productive forces, taken not only as a level of technological information but rather as a function of the application of technology to the productive process and the development of the social and entrepreneurial division of labor. All these themes are being developed today by the sociology of labor, as well as by anthropology in the case of primitive peoples, by the history of technology, etc. The aim is to have the methods of observation in this domain penetrate more deeply, in order to broaden the scientific vision on this level.

2) The level of the relations of production, which depends on the foregoing but at the same time conditions it, since productive forces are developed by concrete, determinate societies. On this level an analysis has to be made of the general components of the social division of labor according to the function of those groups (manual laborers, non-manual workers, in production, transport, selling, etc.) and of the property relations (owners of the means of production, of labor power, etc.). Here we go directly into class analysis, seeking to give their characteristics on the general level of a determinate mode of production or on the concrete level of a given socioeconomic structure.

3) After completing this analysis we can differentiate, within the social structure, the basic classes of society, the intermediate classes, those in process of formation or decline, the various sectors of classes, interrelating them within a mode of production or a social structure.

*B. Analysis of social interests*

Once we have the factors of the internal relations of these groups (relations of exploitation, dependence, function, etc.) as material forces, we can begin the analysis of the interests corresponding to

them in the mode of production or the social structure. As we differentiate the interests, we place them in relation to one another as opposed and interdependent, since this is the only way in which we can attain effectual understanding of their significance. On the other hand, we can only understand these interests from a dynamic point of view, in which their conflict and contradictions give rise to a dynamics of society, a class struggle.

The analysis must go into the sub-interests of the various sectors of classes, the political or economic elites and the various subgroups that go to make up a social structure. On this level we must introduce more concrete elements of the social structure, such as power structure, income distribution, demographic structure, hierarchies of social strata and forms of stratification, institutions, etc.

When we have this general picture we can understand a social structure from a dialectical point of view in which the structure appears as both a result and conditioning factor of the relations among contradictory social interests.

### *C. Class consciousness and psychology*

We can go on from the identification of this dynamics of contradictory interests in motion, to identify the tendencies toward formation of class consciousness and those that constitute class psychology. And this applies not only to classes but also to the sectors of classes and the subgroups and social strata that diversify and limit the class structure.

On this level the abstract economic-social analysis must be combined with the most direct kind of analysis. To identify the ideological phenomena, we have to perfect the qualitative and quantitative techniques of analysis of texts, bringing the analysis of the text within the framework of the model of previously identified interests, so as to analyze the relations among the ideological phenomena, the basic ideological tendencies and their dynamics.

Another type of work that has been little developed are studies of political movements, public opinion, strikes, meetings, demonstrations, conferences, etc., from which we could grasp those interests in their complex movement. Inquiries into social groups and classes (always retaining a solid technique of analysis of attitudes and opinions, not identifying prejudiced statements with actual attitudes)

are another fundamental factor for identifying the psychology of the classes.

*D. Integrating the analysis*

Thus, the analysis unfolds on various possible planes: the plane of the mode of production, the most abstract one; the plane of the concrete socioeconomic structure (which presupposes the combination of various modes of production and their internal variations) and of the cultural and ideological superstructure; finally, the plane of the cycle, which, as has been said, leads to diversification of classes and groups depending on the various situations of the cycle. Class analysis must combine all these planes to arrive at its true scientific concreteness.

Raising the possibility of a cycle analysis related to a structural and "modal" analysis<sup>13</sup> raises the problem of the role of consciousness in the course of history; it amounts practically to the problem of prediction and planning. If we are able to foresee not only the possible movement of determinate modes of production and social structures but also the possible movement of determinate cycles, we can act consciously on the socioeconomic and political factor in a suitable and effective manner. Here social science finds its most perfect realization. The analysis of the class struggle that has been developed within this group of levels and duly integrated would be the key element in this union between theory and practice.

It is interesting to note that this scientific ideal is in deep opposition to a positivistic science which looks for general laws valid in and of themselves. Our class analysis leads us to the particular, and seeks laws that are specific and not general. For the analysis of classes can not be separated from certain methodological conditions which it necessarily presupposes.

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<sup>13</sup> We use the term "modal" to refer to analysis which delimits the possibilities or possible modes of relations in each mode of production.